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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TOKYO 001215

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SUBJECT: COMFORT WOMEN: KEEPING IT LOW KEY

Classified By: AMBASSADOR J. THOMAS SCHIEFFER. REASONS 1.4 (B),(D).

¶1. (C) Summary. Prime Minister Abe and Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leaders appear to have made a conscious decision to lower the volume on the comfort women issue, judging by a sharp decrease in the number of public statements on the subject over the past week. Abe demonstrated this restraint during a March 19 Diet session, when he responded to a question saying only: "I adhere to the Kono Statement." This may not reflect a change in thinking by Abe and other conservatives, but a more realistic understanding of the international outcry over Abe's earlier attempts to distance Japan from responsibility for its wartime acts. Concern over the possible disruptive effects of the controversy on upcoming summits with President Bush and Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao appears to be the driving force behind this new public stance. How Abe and the LDP will handle the issue post-summit remains an open question. End summary.

¶2. (C) Over the past week, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and at least some of his top aides in the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) seem to have pulled back on publicly questioning the historical basis for the 1993 Kono Statement. In fact, they have largely refrained from making comments of any kind concerning the comfort women issue. In a Sunday talk show appearance on March 11, Abe stood by the Kono Statement, saying his "feelings" toward the comfort women were no different than those expressed by former Prime Ministers Koizumi and Hashimoto in their letters of apology. He told the Diet press corps on March 12: "I think we naturally share the feelings of apology for those who at the time suffered immeasurable psychological wounds." LDP Secretary General Hidenao Nakagawa told reporters that same week: "The right thing to do is to let experts and historians take the lead ... It should not be discussed as an issue in the realm of politics or foreign affairs." LDP General Affairs Council Chair Yuya Niwa has said, "there is no need for the party to conduct an investigation right away," and cautioned against politicizing the issue. Speaker of the Lower House, Yohei Kono, in his first public remarks on the controversy surrounding his 1993 statement, told reporters, "I issued it with conviction. I hope people will take it as it is."

¶3. (C) Following a very heated March 13 debate at the Prime Minister's offices, Nariaki Nakayama, leader of the right-wing "Committee of LDP Lawmakers to Consider Japan's

Future and Historical Education," agreed to postpone plans by his group to reexamine the comfort women issue. According to an Embassy Tokyo contact present during that meeting, Nakayama initially called for the Abe administration to launch a government-sponsored inquiry. LDP policy chief Shoichi Nakagawa argued that the LDP should take the lead. Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Hakubun Shimomura, speaking for Abe, convinced Nakayama to postpone the research until after summits with China and the United States, repeating Abe's pledge to provide the LDP group with historical documents from government archives. In the end, no final agreement was reached on whether the LDP or the government would eventually conduct the historical study, but Shimomura and Nakagawa left open the possibility that the government could still convene a task force to reexamine the comfort women issue at an appropriate time.

¶4. (C) The issue percolated back into the media on March 16 when Abe's office provided a written reply -- much like a Congressional "Question for the Record" -- to an earlier Diet inquiry from an opposition Social Democratic Party (SDP) member. The response repeats earlier assertions that the government had discovered no evidence of direct Japanese military coercion of comfort women. It also makes the point that the Kono Statement was never adopted by a formal cabinet decision, which is true. At the same it notes that successive cabinets have upheld the Kono Statement, and that there are no plans to take up a formal cabinet decision on the subject. The "QFR" received relatively little coverage in Japan, probably because it merely restated the government's previous position.

¶5. (C) On March 19, Social Democratic Party leader Mizuho Fukushima followed up in a Lower House Budget Committee

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hearing by pressing Abe further. She asked him if, when he says he stands by the Kono Statement, he also includes the portions that say some of the comfort women were "taken against their will," with the involvement of government authorities. Abe answered simply: "As I said last year in the Diet, I adhere to the Kono Statement."

¶6. (C) The deliberately cautious approach displayed by Abe in recent days is likely due to greater sensitivity toward April summits with China and the United States. Whether he has the intent or the political will and clout to shelve the comfort women issue permanently is a separate matter. Some political commentators here suggest that Abe will use the issue after the summits to pander to his conservative base in hopes of rallying support for himself and the LDP in what are expected to be difficult Upper House elections in July. We, however, agree with those Embassy contacts who argue that Abe, as a founding member in 1997 of Nakayama's LDP history committee, has no need to burnish his nationalist credentials. Rather, his statements questioning the historical basis of the Kono Statement simply express his real opinion.

¶7. (C) Embassy Tokyo has consistently expressed one theme to its Japanese contacts -- arguing that the Japanese military did not technically coerce the comfort women into prostitution is a losing proposition that will only hurt Japan's reputation in America. Praise by Ambassador Schieffer and visiting Australian Prime Minister Howard for Abe's March 11 expression of regret to comfort women victims and his renewed commitment to stand by the Kono Statement were featured prominently in the Japanese media, and seem to have been well received by the Japanese public. The Ambassador's March 16 remarks decrying the treatment of the comfort women and calling the evidence of coercion "self-evident" also received wide coverage.

¶8. (C) Comment. Regardless of his own personal beliefs, Abe and at least some of his top aides seem to recognize that there is much to lose diplomatically by continuing to

question the basis for the Kono Statement in advance of the China and U.S. summits. Whether Abe is able to maintain control of the more conservative elements of the LDP after his return from Washington is less certain. Efforts by a committee of conservative LDP lawmakers to reexamine the historical record are likely to resume soon after Abe's summit with the President, according to one member of the panel. If Abe cooperates with that investigation by providing the group with official records, as he has promised to do, or continues to strongly deny official involvement in coercion of sex slaves, it would be a disturbing indication that he is willing to isolate Japan internationally in furtherance of a conservative, nationalist agenda.

SCHIEFFER